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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates current research literature on effective schools. While acknowledging that the research provides systematic direction for school improvement, the author also points out some shortcomings of existing studies, including (1) inadequate description of curriculum content and of circumstances believed to result in test success; (2) no acknowledgement of the complexity of the whole educational process; (3) a narrow, formula-oriented view of school improvement; (4) overemphasis on test performance; (5) inability to acknowledge that class, racial, and similar forms of differentiation in instruction can be detrimental to all students; (6) neglect of other issues that might be critical to education from a broad perspective; and (7) emphasis on the importance of leadership over community oriented decision making. In view of the research focus, it is held, many teachers have become discouraged concerning their role in improving schools; thus, the author asserts, it is not surprising that few among the current crop of teachers possess the idealism and sense of educational commitment that characterized teachers in earlier years, especially during the 1960s. What is needed, the author stresses, is a reaffirmation of the view that teachers should have a hand in the education of their students, rather than being mere implementors of the technical formulations dictated by the effective schools search. (MJL)

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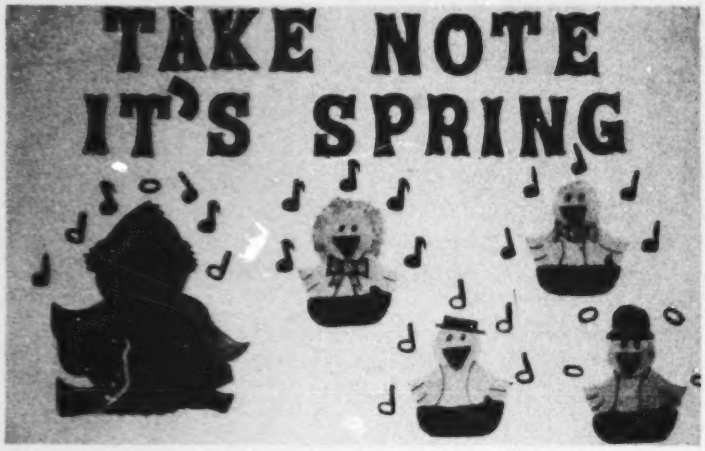
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Effective Schools, Teaching and Learning

by Vito Perrone

Introducing the Author

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INSIGHTS into open education

Effective Schools, Teaching and Learning

By Vito Perrone
University of North Dakota

INTRODUCTION

We have what seems an unrequited love affair in education with a science of sorts--a search for "the one best system," that particular technology which will assure a closer match between the very large expectations we have set for education and the ever present realities. This orientation was exacerbated a bit in the late 60's and early 70's by the Coleman and Jencks challenge regarding the value of schools, especially in regard to the poor and minorities. While most thoughtful individuals were able to dismiss the Coleman-Jencks line of work fairly easily, having considerable observational data that were contradictory, there were others who took it as a challenge for additional research. The Effective Schools research is one outgrowth. Its prescriptions represent, in many respects, the new technology, the fresh definers of educational discourse, the guiding outline of a burgeoning literature. But, in spite of the relative simplicity of the message, there are tensions. I will share in my presentation a number of them.

As a way of engaging the challenge of the Effective Schools literature, I want to begin with an assertion about teachers and then make use of the 1960's as a cultural benchmark for commenting on our current situation. Whether it will all fit for you remains to be seen--if it doesn't connect directly with your educational interests, it might provide something more to think about.

You have to know at the outset that I continue to believe that teachers--not programs--make the critical difference in schools. The higher the quality of teachers--intellectually, socially, academically and morally--the greater the potential for schools to be successful with children and young people. That may be conventional wisdom but I will argue that many of our current conceptions of school organization and practice, as well as what appears philosophically to be emerging from much of the Effective Schools research, have qualities antithetical to such conventional wisdom. Please keep this perspective in mind as I proceed now with a personal, mostly, autobiographical context within which to place the current discourse around Effective Schools.

THE WATERSHED YEARS: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

I have chosen to begin with the 1960's inasmuch as this decade is viewed in a number of ways as a benchmark for much of the current discourse. As importantly, however, it represents for me my entry into the world of teacher education and a more conscious examination

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* *A presentation to the Minnesota Conference on Leadership in Special Education in November 1982. (Some of the content, especially that related to "Effective Schools," was also included in a presentation to the International Reading Association.)*

of teachers in schools and society.

We have come to view the 60's as a cultural watershed--a decade to measure events against. I suspect for many here, the 60's represent much that is life defining. It clearly was a period in which change was visible, when longer standing values as well as social, political and economic beliefs were under challenge. In the aftermath, which is our present, the 60's are seen, not unsurprisingly, as generative as well as degenerate, a flowering of the culture as well as aberration. The expansion of political democracy and common schools in the 1830's and 40's, the populist revival period of the 1880's and 90's and the social revolution associated with the early twentieth century were viewed similarly. I cite these pre-1960's progressive reform periods that affected schools, values, literature, the arts and popular culture as a way of suggesting that the 1960's years, rather than being unique, are part of a longer standing strand within the American experience and can't be dismissed as many would like. The sixties likely won't be the last such benchmark period in our history.

The 1960's represented a time when commitments to equal educational opportunity in all areas of human endeavor were high and when large numbers of people of all ages believed that through their individual efforts the quality of life in their communities and in the country as a whole could be improved. It was a time when cultural pluralism--diversity in the broadest sense--as a process for active commitment and participation--became an understandable goal and when significant political, social and educational reform appeared possible. Such beliefs are under enormous challenge today. Disappointingly, the response is rather impotent.

I was especially encouraged by the young people who entered education in the 60's, individuals who genuinely believed that within the schools there would be support for creative attention to the social and intellectual needs of children and young people, room for significant integration of academic and community interests, education in the broadest sense rather than schooling as often defined. The Peace Corps in those years attracted similarly motivated individuals. We still have at our institution, and I assume at others, many fine young people preparing for careers in teaching and my purpose is not to suggest otherwise; however, they tend now, it seems, to be less diverse in their backgrounds, interests and talents. There are many fewer dancers, artists, musicians, philosophers, poets, national merit scholars and social activists. And how many of those intellectually alive 60's people remained in teaching? Obviously many did--but far more, unfortunately, did not. I have met with many of our graduates who have left teaching for a wide range of alternative careers. Most have continued their social and political commitments and maintain, as well, their broad array of avocational interests. But teaching lost its attraction for them as they perceived testing, tracking, labeling, narrowing and distancing--essentially technical approaches to education--gaining dominance.

In the fall of 1980, the Boston Globe carried as an education feature a series entitled: "Whatever happened to the MATS?" Needless to say, the series spoke to me, reminding me of the interactions I was having with our own graduates who had left teaching. These MATS, essentially 1960's and early 70's graduates from Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Wesleyan and Columbia, were

described in the feature as bright, articulate, energetic young people with high ideals and considerable commitment--symbols of a new interest in diversity and educational reform. That very few were left in schools in 1980 was, for the writer of the feature, a visible sign that schools had little, if any, significant intellectual base. This particular account was followed by a number of letters from public school parents who wrote eloquently about their children being abandoned by too many of the best and brightest, faced by an increasing number of technicians who appeared uninterested in their struggles. To follow the educational literature of the last few years, one would come to believe that technicians were desired, that education, the larger hope engendered by our culture, was again giving way to schooling, a minimalist position.

During the past couple of years, I have been re-reading a good deal of the progressive literature--in large measure articles, books and diaries from the 1830-1940 period--much of it written by classroom teachers or close observers of classrooms. While this literature is not representative of the schools in the largest sense, it is part of the fuller view of education that seems always somehow to remain alive. I am impressed by the richness and clarity of the language in these accounts, the obvious love and familiarity of the writers with a breadth of classical and contemporary literature and thought, by the quality of teachers' expectations for young people and the quality of the teaching-learning activities they supported. Not only, for example, was Carolyn Pratt, a producer of much of this literature, an educator--a keen observer of children's development, a curriculum builder and researcher--she was as well a poet, social reformer and major interpreter of Freudian thought. There were many like her--Bronson Alcott, Horace Mann, Susan Blow, Francis Parker, Charles Adams, Lelia Partridge, John Dewey, Marietta Johnson, Ella Flagg Young, Julia Weber Gordon to mention just a very small number--persons about whom no one would build a caricature of blandness and limited intellectualism. The 60's produced a similar spirit and sense of intellectual ferment, a reaffirmation in education writ broadly.

During this past year, and I believe it relates, I had the occasion to engage in a discussion with Dorothy Ross, a University of Virginia social historian, about some research she was doing on the social sciences and higher education. She asked me if I would hazard a guess about the fields that attracted the largest share of Harvard College graduates during the 1915-20 period. Knowing that this represented a major reform period in American life, I suggested that education and social services were likely high on the list. In fact, they were near the top and ahead of law. Not surprisingly, education and the social services now hardly show up as preferences for graduates of Harvard College. The same would be the case for graduates of similar institutions--public and private--across the country. I take no joy from this as I don't believe it bodes well for children and young people in schools.

Are the schools becoming, as they have at other times, possibly even unwittingly, places that discourage, as many of our 60's graduates suggest, professionalism in its more traditional and progressive form? While I am not prepared to accept this formulation in any absolute sense; in part, because I know of too many places where it is not the case, I believe that there are a number of discouraging tendencies,

pressures and practices, conditions that do not, in fact, encourage the best and brightest to go into teaching or remain in teaching. In relation to this, Gerald Grant suggests in the summer 1981 Daedalus that technical values have come to dominate schools--teachers and administrators who know how to use various management and testing systems being more valued than persons of significant intellect; persons willing to follow prescriptions more valued than persons who wish to develop their own curricula. As a related illustration of this, Frank Smith, a psycholinguist of note, tells the following story of his work with reading specialists. It parallels some of my own recent experience with a group of special educators. It relates to his account of a child presented with the passage He lives in a house. One child read the sentence, "He lives in an apartment" while a second read it as "He lives in a horse." Asking if either of the children might be having difficulty with reading, Smith noted that most of the specialists thought the first was having the most difficulty. The second, after all, was off by only one consonant, while the first was off by an entire word. Isn't that a view of reading that is being increasingly supported? It is certainly the orientation of most of the programs I see being used with children labelled learning disabled or language deficient. It clearly speaks to the power of our technical approach to education.

In relation to this growing attachment to technical considerations as regards educational practice, the special education field has made a particularly heavy investment that needs critical reflection. The testing-prescription apparatus is a potent example. Psychological tests, projective tests, skills tests, aptitude tests and labels have in many cases become the principal arsenal of special educators. By gaining a monopoly on the interpretive language and the authority of this language, special educators have too often set themselves apart from their other colleagues in schools. But toward what ends? Why, for example, did it take poor Mexican-American parents in Santa Ana, California, to ask why so many Mexican-American and black children were in EMR classes--three to five times their ratio in the schools? Why didn't it occur to the professional special educators that something might be awry in the testing, interpretation and placement procedures. Why did it take parents in the more recent Larry P. case to challenge the continuing use of an I.Q. test score as the principal base for EMR placement in San Francisco? Again, why wasn't the lead taken by special educators? When one is tied too closely to elaborated placement procedures emanating from some distant source--whether the federal government, the state government, the school district office--it is, I believe, very difficult to be thoughtful provocators of discussion about what it means to grow and learn, advocates for careful observation and interaction, students of content and process, teaching and learning, as well as system or program. But that is increasingly the pattern.

SCHOOLING OR EDUCATION

We are, and this goes far beyond the special education field, in the midst of an unparalleled schooling rather than education race. Phrases such as "direct instruction," "time on task," "high academic, basic skills expectations," "management systems," "basic skills testing," are becoming the dominant definers of discourse, a

reflection of the ascendancy of a technical rather than a liberating view of schools and the education process.

The most potent school-related descripter today is "Effective Schools," a construct associated with the research on Effective Schools carried out by Ron Edmonds, Wilbur Brookover, PDK, Michael Rutter and B. Rosenshine and described quite extensively by Don Medley, Beverly Glen and Richard Hersch, among others. Almost every journal in education has given space to this formulation in the last two years. To hear it discussed, one would think that after centuries of fumbling about, we now know scientifically what makes schools work--ergo, it should be fairly easy to make every school work. (Now I am using the advocates' language rather than my own.)

The Effective Schools literature has a lot of appeal--it grows out of the dominant forms of social science research; it provides unambiguous direction, hence, appears authoritative; it encourages many who have lost hope in the schools to hope again; it seems congruent with much of the emphasis on the schools as centers for maintaining floors of achievement in basic skills (another kind of safety net); it stresses orderliness, uniformity and adherence--values viewed by many as paramount to societal progress; and it reasserts the importance of hierarchical leadership. However appealing, simple and straightforward--and I personally support its reaffirmation of the importance of the individual schools as the focus for change, the critical nature of purposefulness, high expectations and curriculum continuity--it is, nonetheless, a strange script. I have difficulty reading it as it has no voice for me. Potent in its assertions, it is weak in its descriptive qualities. Rutter, whose work is a bit more appealing than most, suggests, in 15,000 Hours, for example, that "the provision of school outings was significantly correlated with examination success" without ever producing any description of the circumstances, the purposes, whether the outings related to what was being studied or were followed up, were long or short. It is as if it didn't matter. Seldom in this literature do we ever learn about the content of curriculum. We receive no acknowledgement either of the complexity of schools, communities, teaching and learning, encouraging, I believe, too many educators to view school improvement as little more than the application of a five step formula which usually begins with a "strong principal." Knowing that the remaining themes are familiar--orderly school climate, focus on academic, basic skills instruction, time on task, homework, direct teaching, clear academic goals, carefully sequenced, generally predetermined curricula--I'll comment on some of the challenges of this particular wave of thought to education, broadly defined, and to my interest in assuring that teaching is interesting, engaging, intellectually stimulating and attractive to the most thoughtful, intellectually alive, committed persons among us. If otherwise, children and their communities get far less than they deserve.

Carl Bereiter provided us a view of our current tension in his Harvard Educational Review article in 1972 entitled "Schools Without Education." His essential message was that skill training and custodial care are the only legitimate functions of elementary schools--that we need to rid ourselves of the belief that schools can educate. Now Bereiter argued his case quite

persuasively--so, too, do those currently promoting Effective Schools.

Beverly Glen, a major Effective Schools analyst, writes: "Whether or not the emphasis on the narrow range of school skills measurable by multiple-choice tests is correct, Effective Schools focus on raising test scores." Effective Schools, indeed, focus their energy on instruction and learning in those areas measured by tests. I don't find this particularly uplifting. School districts almost everywhere are reporting enormous test score gains over the past two years--Boston, New York, Richmond, Des Moines (and by the way on fewer real dollars). Has the ability of children to read as reading is commonly understood in the culture at large actually improved by 30-40 percent--which are the kinds of increases being reported? Or, are we seeing little more than what we would expect from situations where programs are geared heavily to the tests? Having some experience with all of these settings, I have few doubts about the answer. Thinking about testing, how should we respond to the National Assessment report that students are scoring better on basic skills tests in reading/language arts but are declining in what are being called higher level skills--analysis, inference, critical thought. Analysts of this data suggest that so much instructional activity is geared toward the requirements of a vast array of narrowly formulated multiple choice tests that such a result should have been anticipated.

There is another strain within the Effective Schools literature that also warrants attention--essentially the social class, ethnic-racial differentiations.

Don Medley writes: "Effective teachers of lower socio-economic status children ask more low level questions--facts, names, dates; are less likely to pick up and amplify student responses; have fewer student initiated questions and comments and give less feedback on student questions. Effective teachers devote most of their time to large group or whole group instruction."

George Cureton agrees, noting that "strongly teacher centered learning environments are most effective for poor children." That is the message of the aborted Follow Through evaluation as well, in spite of the anomalies in the data.

Rosenshine, with another dose of corroboration, concludes that "in the elementary grades, effectiveness comes with questions that are at a low cognitive level."

In a related research that Debbie Meier discussed in a recent Dissent article, researchers differentiated between instruction for the middle classes and the poor. Schools for the middle classes had a lot of what most of us have supported for all children--challenge, wide assortment of materials, individualization, open ended questions, analysis and synthesis, trade books, art and music; for the poor, low level questions, group instruction, narrow range of materials, carefully sequenced, step by step, reading materials, etc. To put forth a belief that certain kinds of education are appropriate--even effective--for certain classes of children and not for others is not particularly inspiring; it might even be immoral, however simple and straightforward, whether put forth by persons of liberal or conservative persuasion. Such views, however, have encouraged an increasing array of tracking mechanisms in

schools. I don't have to tell you where the best resources go in these tracking activities. That this activity works to the detriment of all students is not often acknowledged, though careful observational research carried out by Mary Metz in Milwaukee makes this point quite clearly.

What doesn't make a difference in the Effective Schools research? The variables that didn't relate to school effectiveness as determined by test score measurements are, among others, the size of the school, variations in class size, age and experience of teachers, internal forms of organization, amount of teacher preparation time, staying with the same children for more than a year and the level of parent participation. Now, one can't spend a lot of time in schools and really believe that these are not qualitatively significant. One also has to know that such conclusions are likely to work against many of our more valued commitments. New regulations written for Title I, for example, eliminate most of the requirements relating to parents. Such decisions are buttressed by some of the Effective Schools research. Now what about issues that were not examined in the Effective Schools research and not discussed substantially in the related literature--that apparently weren't considered consequential even though I would argue, as you might expect, that they are critical issues if education rather than schooling is viewed as paramount? (I want to acknowledge my debt to Vince Rogers for suggesting some of this part of my discussion.) How one views childhood is not considered. Is childhood viewed as important, a time for exploration, evoking memory, imagining, gathering, playing, etc.? If teachers in a school consider childhood as a unique, important period of time, might they not be expected to act in particular ways? Should they? Does it even matter what teachers' beliefs are? Is it important in a school to have music, art, drama, dance, story telling, opportunities for creative endeavor, support for expressing feelings, searching for personal meanings? Such curricular issues are apparently of little consequence for Effective Schools. Does it matter if students have intense interest in what they do or that interests serve as starting points for curriculum development or that significant choices be available? Apparently not. How important is the physical environment, its aesthetic qualities? Not very important. Is the content being studied particularly critical? Are trade books more or less valued than basal readers? How significant is it to have attribute blocks, cuisinaire rods, sand or water, games, diverse literature? Does it matter very much whether what one studies in social studies is related to what one studies in language arts or science? Is there concern about the quality of children's work, the stories and poems they write, the paintings they create, the questions they ask? Is it important to have children engage in cooperative learning activities, to socialize? (In this regard, Susan Stodolsky's research at the University of Chicago gives very high marks to cooperative learning for the intensity it produces.) Now I have only touched the surface of activities, directions, qualities that have not been considered important to Effective Schools, making it for me as contentless a literature as I have read in a long time--causing me to go back again to that earlier literature or vigorously encouraging even more careful descriptions written by current classroom teachers and observers, unfettered by any formal construct.

If education, as I have shaped it, rather than schooling, were the critical concern, much of current discourse would assume a different shape. The focus on testing, for example, would likely not be so dominant. It would be too apparent that tests as a measurement of growing and learning would be incapable of describing what is important for children and young people, too insensitive to capture the diversity that ought to characterize the schools. A narrow construct of competence rooted in test score designations can be talked about today only because the focus of education is narrowing. Likewise, in our current environment, observation schedules for evaluation purposes can focus on the five or six major Effective Schools research findings--how many minutes are children on-task, is there homework? Remember, of course, that the content of the skill sheets children are working on-task on or what they are asked to complete as homework is not the significant focus of attention in these observations nor is the quality of the questions framed by teachers or students. Researchers at MSU's Institute on Research in Teaching note that much of what is called reading time in the primary grades is devoted to worksheets that demand very little thought, are mechanical and contribute little to reading improvement.

There are other issues not made particularly clear in the Effective Schools literature that I should comment on briefly. Let us take the issue of leadership. We read that Effective Schools have strong principals. What does that mean in practice? What do our thousands of principals need to learn to be such principals? There is little help to be found in the Effective Schools literature.

Schools which I have found over the years to be the most productive --most supportive of learning--are those in which all parties participate in decision-making, where leadership is provided by everyone. In contrast, much of the Effective Schools literature tends to encourage more authoritarian models. Do we really believe that authoritarian models will contribute to excellent schools, encourage the best and brightest to enter and remain in teaching, encourage teachers and students to exert their best, most creative efforts? Schools which I have found to be the most productive are also schools in which teachers are energized through interactive, community oriented processes. In addition, there is an emphasis on localized curriculum development to which teacher commitment is high rather than a dependence on externally organized and standardized curriculum. But can any of these directions be mandated? What does it take to bring a school to this point?

In the Effective Schools literature, good school climate is the most important of all the factors identified. But a good school climate, like leadership, can't be mandated. It too is the end product of a process which takes time and effort involving teachers, students and parents and has, as well, a number of idiosyncratic qualities.

I wish to connect all of this back to teachers, a place I began. Is it any wonder that so many teachers are discouraged? And they are! NEA's survey information in this regard is not encouraging. Is it surprising that so many who came to teaching with particular education writ-large beliefs have departed, given up or need to struggle so much? I have to acknowledge that

it would in a number of ways, within the current climate, in many settings, be easier for teachers to accept current wisdom and use a single text with a predetermined sequence for most instructional areas than examine a broad range of literature and devise in an ongoing manner fresh curriculum materials that relate to specific children and young people. However, the latter is, of course, necessary if student learning at the highest levels--education rather than schooling--is the goal. It would certainly be easier to adopt the latest checklist for student evaluation or accept the current drive toward test score improvement than continue an evaluation process demanding careful observation, record keeping and cross teacher sharing (In this regard, Random House has a fairly expensive kit called "Scoring High on the CAT" --the California Achievement Test-- that is easy to use and MSU researchers have done some interesting work matching particular text series with particular tests. Their message being, if you are using the Metropolitan Achievement Test, use this math series--you will get higher scores.); easier to accept the structure of relatively linear thought than to struggle to become a personal theory builder, the student of teaching that a developmental philosophy demands.

Yet there are those still struggling in schools to put forth a more liberal and liberating view who deserve support, who need the energy that is being dissipated in drives for simple solutions to complex human issues. They need some thoughtful reaffirmation. And it is through such a reaffirmation--supporting the formulation that teachers can be, must be, decision makers, curriculum builders, knowledge generators, persons who think and write, bring to their efforts their individual enthusiasms, high expectations and "irrational commitment" to the educability of all persons as Urie Bronfenbrenner suggests--that we might rekindle among a larger number of the best and brightest of our university student population--the poets, musicians, humanists, mathematicians and scientists--a renewed interest in teaching and the schools, a commitment to join that continuing corps of teachers in the schools who haven't yet given up on the best definitions of education that we can devise. People have asked me what we found in our Carnegie Study of the High School. By and large, we talked with teachers who could define good teaching but weren't close to it in their current practice. It was hard, however, not to be empathetic.

And for those still struggling to affirm what is historically education in its richest sense, there are expectations of import. I will discuss them briefly in relation to evaluation inasmuch as the argument is often posited that the reliance on testing and the drive for teacher accountability in the form of competency tests and competency standards stem from inadequate evaluation performance on the part of teachers. While I accept this to some degree, I believe the impetus is larger and in many cases unrelated to teacher performance in this regard.

Teachers need to communicate clearly to parents and their respective communities their educational purposes regarding the expressive arts, language, the basic skills and the like as well as how they propose to achieve those purposes, the procedures they plan to use to assure children's acquisition and growth in the various learning areas and how they will report to parents. Teachers can be

explicit about all of this. While this is not a new challenge, it is one needing greater attention if those who wish to affirm the best are to maintain, even regain the confidence of those who support them. Teachers need to enter into a systematic process of informal assessment, observation and record keeping, means of getting close to children's learning, developing and sustaining a capacity to organize curriculum in response to what is made increasingly visible. Such directions were eloquently described in the progressive literature of earlier days and affirmed again in the 1960's. I commend to you in this regard the writing of Patricia Carini who has carried this traditional, more phenomenological view to a very high level. To push oneself close to children's learning qualitatively is to become in the process more knowledgeable about children and learning, to become the student of teaching that schools need and parents desire, to become the potential producers of a new literature on teaching and learning. Teachers able to describe children's learning in great detail are teachers who are trusted, who gain authority and are capable of helping re-establish parent and public confidence. We need room for these kinds of teachers. If we push too hard to implement the Effective Schools directions in their technical formulations, focus on schooling, mandate more tests and narrowly defined standards, we are likely to cause discouragement among our most able teachers, push out many more, encourage too few of those we need, and assure that the diversity so vital to the American culture is rendered even more difficult. We will also be even more disappointed in the educational outcomes for children and young people.

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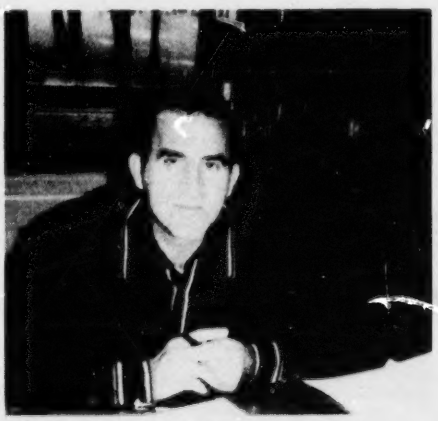
Introducing the Author



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